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SUBJECT: EGYPT'S SEPTEMBER 7 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: FIRST TAKE

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Summary

1. (SBU) Egypt held the first competitive presidential election in its history on September 7. Key themes from today's voting, as observed by contacts and emboffs in the field, have been an apparently low turnout, a predominantly calm atmosphere, with scattered exceptions, and often disorganized and inconsistent procedures inside polling stations. Observers were startled by the Presidential Election Commission's late-breaking reversal, two hours into the voting, of its long standing prohibition on access to polling stations by domestic election monitors. Predictably, at polling sites across the country, the presence and organization of the ruling NDP dwarfed all of the competition. There have been several reports of problems between police and domestic monitors, but those we have looked into have turned out to be minor incidents. Polls officially remain open until 10PM tonight. Counting will begin sometime thereafter. Official results are not expected until late Thursday at the earliest. Egypt appears to have cleared an important hurdle in staging elections that featured no major instances of violence or unrest. However, the results, in which Mubarak will inevitably prevail, will be controversial. Official turnout figures, should they be far at odds with independent assessments, could be particularly contentious. End summary.

Turnout

2. (SBU) We continue to have an overall, anecdotal impression of a low turnout, although a few polling stations we have seen during the day had long lines. An Embassy team visiting Nasr City, a crowded suburb east of Cairo, reported in the late afternoon that polling stations there had been virtually deserted. Polls, which opened at 8 this morning, officially remain open until 10PM. Some have speculated that turnout could pickup as the weather cools after dusk, although it would not be surprising if many polling stations close earlier, especially if the stream of voters appears to be petering out.

Election Commission's Late-Breaking Reversal

3. (SBU) In a very surprising move, the Presidential Election Commission (PEC), announced on State TV at approximately 1030 local, more than two hours after polls had opened, that domestic election monitors could be admitted to polling stations. The announcement reversed the PEC's previously steadfast position against the admission of monitors to the polling sites, an issue which had been the subject of much domestic and international criticism and several legal cases. Leaders of domestic monitoring groups we spoke with were scathing of the PEC in reaction, describing the move as a cynical gesture for international consumption that came too late to have practical benefit at home. (Comment: While it is not yet clear how many domestic monitors were able, in light of the late decision, to enter polling places, the move set an important precedent. It will now be difficult if not impossible for the GOE to refuse domestic monitors access to polling places in November's legislative elections and in future polls. End comment.)

Observers

4. (SBU) Embassy teams visited dozens of polling stations around Cairo and in eight provinces across Egypt. In many cases, police and local elites welcomed Emboffs to polling stations and gave them coffee and a tour of the facility. However, an Emboff in eastern Sinai was taken to a police station and questioned at length by a local State Security representative. Inexplicably, however, the same police who

had marched him to the station subsequently took him on a tour of local polling stations, and they parted on friendly terms.

15. (SBU) Despite the mid-morning decree by the Presidential Elections Commission reversing their earlier prohibition on admitting domestic monitors to polling stations, it is still unclear, as noted above, how many of these monitors ultimately gained access to the polling places. There have been scattered reports of problems between police and monitors (see paras 11 and 12), but we do not currently have any confirmed or detailed information on serious incidents.

Procedures

16. (SBU) In keeping with Egyptian electoral traditions, many of today's voters arrived at the polls in buses and minivans provided by their employers and/or local political elites, often decorated with pro-Mubarak banners and slogans. The majority of polling stations we saw today were also plastered with Mubarak paraphernalia, and many poll workers were themselves sporting Mubarak T-shirts, buttons, and hats supplied by the ruling NDP.

17. (SBU) Contacts in the opposition Wafd and Ghad parties, whose candidates No'man Gom'a and Ayman Nour were Mubarak's most serious, if distant, competitors, told us they felt hampered by their inability (due to lack of personnel) to post representatives in all of the polling stations. A Wafd party representative also told us their complaints about Mubarak posters in the polling places were rebuffed by electoral officials, who said that, as head of state, his portrait must be displayed in public facilities such as schools.

18. (SBU) In many (but not all) polling stations, voters' thumbs were dipped in phosphoric ink as a safeguard against multiple voting (an apparently widespread problem in the May 25 constitutional referendum). However, Gameela Ismail, wife of candidate Ayman Nour, asserted in a widely broadcast mobile phone text message that the ink was easily removed with deodorant. (Note: We have not had the opportunity to test this assertion. End note.)

19. (SBU) Across Egypt, chaotic and disorganized voter lists appeared to be the rule rather than the exception. Numerous anecdotes from the field suggest that many who turned out to vote left frustrated after being unable to locate their name or designated polling station. Officials at a Cairo police station, where many went to search for their names on the voters' lists, opined that the rolls were particularly disorganized due to the hasty consolidation of polling stations to allow for judicial coverage. On the other extreme were reports, particularly in Alexandria, that polling stations were admitting anyone with a national i.d. card, in violation of published procedures, and with implications for fraud.

110. (SBU) In several instances, both in Cairo and in the provinces, Emboffs noted groups of voters gathered near polling stations, carrying LE 20 notes (about USD 3.50), - perhaps financial enticements to come down and vote. In other areas, such as the Shubra district of Northern Cairo, local elites put out tables of complimentary fast food and soft drinks near polling stations to induce local citizens to come to the polls.

Violence/Voter Intimidation

111. (SBU) The protest group Kifaya staged a demonstration of 800-1000 persons in Cairo's Tahrir Square midday. A Kifaya statement released subsequently confirmed our observations that police had allowed the event to proceed without incident. However, a smaller group of Kifaya members reportedly clashed with unidentified thugs, possibly ruling NDP supporters or, according to an unconfirmed report, plainclothes police. Several Kifaya members were lightly injured.

112. (SBU) A report that four domestic monitors were beaten and detained in Assiyut, Upper Egypt, appears to have been exaggerated - a representative of the domestic monitoring coalition confirmed to us that one of its volunteers in Assiyut was slapped by police, and several briefly detained, but noted that following an intervention with State Security, the situation was resolved and all four had been allowed to resume their monitoring activities. There are several other reports of incidents involving domestic monitors in Upper Egypt and the Delta, but details remain sketchy. Another contact advised us of report that a judge in Minya supervising a polling station had been injured in an altercation with an unidentified party candidate

representative. Our Embassy observer in the city later determined that there had indeed been a shoving match between a judge and an NDP representative, when the latter tried to interfere in the process. The judge emerged unscathed in a prevailed in the dispute.

Next Steps

113. (SBU) Polls officially close at 10PM local. Some have speculated that turnout could pickup after dusk, when the weather cools, although many polling stations will probably close early, should turnout remain low. Only after 10PM will counting begin. We are unlikely to have any official results or statistics until late Thursday at the earliest.

Comment

114. (SBU) As of early evening, Egypt appears to have cleared a key hurdle in avoiding any major instances of violence or unrest associated with the elections. The results, in which Mubarak will certainly prevail, will be controversial - and opposition candidates will inevitably cry fraud. Official turnout statistics will also be closely and skeptically scrutinized. It seems likely that the findings of domestic monitors will track with our impression of a low voter turnout. The GOE will seek to present as high a participation figure as they can in order to confer legitimacy on Mubarak's reelection, but should the official figure be far at odds with the estimates of domestic monitors, and even the increasingly assertive and bold Egyptian judges who supervised the polls, it will risk achieving the opposite result. End comment.

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